

Patient Information:

Herpes

Questions and Answers

What is Herpes?

Herpes Simplex is a viral infection. It is responsible for the “cold sores” or “fever blisters” that occur around the mouth and it also causes the sores in the genital area known as genital herpes. There are two Herpes Simplex viruses (HSV-1) and (HSV-2). Either of the viruses can infect the mouth or genital area.

How does someone get Herpes?

Herpes is transmitted by direct skin to skin contact. It may be spread from person to person by kissing, sexual intercourse, anal intercourse or oral sex. A person may spread the infection from one part of their body to another. Individuals should always wash their hands after touching an infected area.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms may begin as early as 2-20 days after contact with the virus but they may not appear until weeks, months or even years after the initial infection occurs. The first viral symptoms may be so mild that they go unnoticed or they may be quite severe.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are sores at or near the location where the virus enters the body. The sores are usually clusters of blisters but may be small cracks or irritations. The area may itch, tingle or burn just before the blisters appear. Flu-like symptoms are common during the first outbreak. These include swollen glands, headache, muscle aches and fever. Sometimes a sore throat or burning with urination may occur depending upon the entry site of the virus.

Will it ever go away?

No, the virus retreats into the nervous system where it remains dormant until it is reactivated. The immune system develops antibodies against the virus so that the symptoms of recurrences are typically not as severe as the first outbreak. The sores may be smaller, fewer in number and may heal faster. They often recur in the same location but may relocate in close proximity to the previous outbreaks.

How often will outbreaks occur?

Some people have frequent outbreaks after they are first infected. Usually the time between outbreaks lengthens as time passes. Some people have one outbreak and may rarely if ever see another occurrence. The number of outbreaks is dependent upon the person's immune system and how well it functions.

What triggers a recurrence?

Stress is thought to weaken the immune system thereby allowing the virus to reactivate. Negative stressors such as illness, fatigue, prolonged exposure to sunlight, menstruation or vigorous sexual intercourse are examples of triggers. Good stressors such as vacations, getting married or graduating may also be triggers.

When can the virus be spread from person to person?

A person is most contagious just before symptoms begin and during an outbreak. They may also be able to transmit the virus when no signs or symptoms are present. This is called asymptomatic viral shedding and means that people can transmit the virus to others without knowing they are doing so. Some individuals don't know they are infected but may still be able to infect others.

Are medications available to help with symptoms?

Yes, there are several antiviral medications available with a prescription. The medications may be taken to decrease or suppress outbreaks, to decrease the shedding of the virus or to treat outbreaks when they occur.

How can I protect myself if I'm not already infected?

- ◆ Abstaining from sexual activity
- ◆ Having only one sexual partner
- ◆ Using condoms consistently and correctly. This

Herpes

Questions and Answers

means the condom must be in place before any genital-to-genital contact.

- ◆ Getting to know a partner before becoming sexually active with them.
- ◆ Using clear, honest communication and discussing each person's past sexual history.
- ◆ If you know you or your partner has herpes and you choose to have skin-to-skin contact, take measures to reduce your risk of infection. Some ways include but are not limited to:
 - ◇ Use barrier methods of protection.
 - ◇ Abstain from skin-to-skin contact from the first indication of an outbreak until at least 7 days after a sore has healed and/or an outbreak has ended.

Are there tests for Herpes?

- ◆ A viral culture may be taken on a genital lesion but it must be taken within 72 hours of the onset of the lesion.
- ◆ Blood tests may be done to look for antibodies to the Herpes virus. At least 13 weeks must have elapsed from the onset of symptoms or suspicious contact for the blood tests to be accurate. Even if a blood test is positive for the Herpes virus, it does not indicate that a particular lesion was caused by that virus.

What about pregnancy?

Having herpes does not affect fertility. If a woman has a history of herpes and becomes pregnant, she should inform her gynecologist. Transmission of herpes to newborns is rare, however, if an outbreak is present at the time of delivery, a cesarean-section is usually performed. Transmission of the virus during pregnancy can create serious risks for the baby.

How can I learn more?

CDC National STI and AIDS hotlines:

1-800-227-8922 or 1-800-342-2437

En Espanol 1-800-344-7432

TTY Service 1-800-243-7889

National Herpes Hotline

1-919-361-8488